



PRESS RELEASE

House National Security Committee

Floyd D. Spence, Chairman

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STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FLOYD SPENCE

CONFERENCE REPORT ON H.R. 3616

FY 99 NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

September 24, 1998

Mr. Speaker, the fiscal year 1999 defense authorization bill started the year out on a bipartisan note. It was reported out of the National Security Committee back in early May on a vote of 50-1, and it passed the House on a vote of 357-60. I am glad to inform all of my colleagues that the conference report before us today also enjoys strong bipartisan support. Even after several weeks of often difficult compromise, all 33 National Security Committee conferees signed the conference report – something which has not occurred in 17 years, not since 1981. Likewise, all Senate conferees have signed the conference report.

Mr. Speaker, the funding authorized in this conference report is consistent with the spending levels set in the Balanced Budget Act, but it unfortunately represents the fourteenth consecutive year of real decline in the defense budget. While the fall of the Berlin Wall brought with it an opportunity to reduce our Cold War defense structure, almost ten years later I believe that the threats and challenges America confronts and the pressures these threats have placed on a still shrinking U.S. military have been dramatically underestimated. The mismatch between the nation's military strategy and the resources required to implement it is growing. As a result, serious quality of life, readiness and modernization shortfalls have developed that, if left unaddressed, threaten a return to the "hollow military" of the 1970s. Mr. Speaker, it is a serious problem.

During each of the last three years, Congress has increased spending over the President's defense budget in order to address a number of these shortfalls. This year, faced with the constraints of the Balanced Budget Act, we have not increased the defense budget and instead, are left with the much more difficult challenge of trying to reprioritize the President's budget request. However, through such careful reprioritization, we have provided the military services at least some of the tools necessary to better recruit and retain quality personnel, better train personnel and better equip them with advanced technology. This conference report is a marked improvement over the President's budget request as indicated by the unanimous and bipartisan support it has among the House and Senate "core" conferees.

Mr. Speaker, this conference report is before the House today only as a result of the incredible efforts of all conferees, as well as the staff. In particular, I want to recognize the critical roles played by the National Security Committee subcommittee and panel chairmen and ranking members. Their efforts made my job easier and their dedication has made today possible.

I would also like to thank the gentleman from Missouri, the committee's Ranking Member, Mr. Skelton, for his cooperation and support. I have enjoyed working with Mr. Skelton for the many years he has served as a dedicated member of the committee, and am honored to be working with him now in his capacity as the committee's Ranking Member.

I would also like to pay tribute to my good friend Senator Strom Thurmond, for whom this conference report has been named. There is no one in this, or any other, Congress who has done more than Senator Thurmond for our nation's defense, so presenting this conference report to the House, in his name, is a special honor for me. Senator Thurmond will step down as Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee at the end of this Congress, but I have no doubt that he will continue to work tirelessly and effectively on behalf of the men and women who serve in our military. It is his way, he knows no other. So I look forward to many more productive years of working with my good friend from South Carolina to ensure our military remains second-to-none.